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THE CONVERSATION

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Kim Jong-un is not the only obstruction to peace in Korea

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Martti Ahtisaari, former president of Finland, meets South Korean foreign minister Yun Byung-Se. EPA/Jeon Heon-Kyun

Some of world's leading peace specialists gathered in Seoul recently to come up with some ideas on how to break the deadlock between North and South Korea.

There is no immediate danger of war between the two, but a peace treaty is still a distant prospect – and reunification an even more distant hope. And indeed the talks revealed as much, despite the key role played by Martti Ahtisaari in the talks. Ahtisaari won the Nobel Peace prize and is a notable peace broker who mediated the Aceh peace talks in Indonesia – the only truly successful peace process to have taken place in East Asia this century.

One-way conversation

The fundamental problem with the South Korean approach to Korean peace was evident in the talks – there was no North Korean representation. It is more than seven years since the two Koreas came together in a summit and almost as long since the six-party talks on Korean peace ended.

North Korea feels that it is expected to come begging to the negotiation table while, at the same time, the South campaigns for regime change and conducts military exercises with the US that North Korea takes as a threat of invasion.

Instead of a direct dialogue, the government of South Korea is waiting for the North Korean regime to collapse – even though an ever increasing number of experts think that completely unrealistic. And while the South has been waiting, the North has significantly strengthened its military capabilities, including its nuclear preparedness, while its ordinary citizens descend further into poverty.

Party politics

Even the prospect of change of government in South Korea doesn't mean progress is on the cards. It is widely speculated that Moon Jae-in, the leader of opposition party New Politics Alliance for Democracy, will become president in the 2017 elections but, diplomacy with the North seems to be a domestic, party-political issue for him.



Moon Jae-In may not have his priorities right. EPA/Jeon Heon-Kyun

I asked him how he intends to help the government in its fragile efforts to prepare the country for peace and reunification, and how he would involve the current ruling party in his own peace efforts. The opposition leader's response was only too familiar: cooperation is only possible once the ruling party starts supporting his own party's line. There must be unconditional direct dialogue with North Korea and the continuation of six-party talks.

Moon does not expect such a change to be forthcoming though. In fact, he seemed rather satisfied that there is little hope for initiatives such as the Presidential Committee

for the Preparation of Korea's Reunification to bear fruit before the election.

Instead of helping, Moon seems to want to use the stalemate to bolster his election campaign. In fact, the opposition leader's approach to his opponent is almost identical to the government's approach to North Korea. Serious dialogue on cooperation with the opponent is conditional on compromises. Rather than cooperating, Moon too wants to wait for the downfall of his rival.

Stalemate

Asked by a member of the Presidential Committee for the Preparation of Korea's Reunification if there was any hope for Korea were he to be appointed as mediator, Ahtisaari said at the talks that only the conflicting parties can make peace. A mediator could only help, and Ahtisaari would only consider accepting such a task if he could see that the parties to the conflict were prepared to get serious and that the will to peace and compromises was strongly felt both in the ruling parties as well as in the opposition.

And as long as peace with the North is used as a tool in South Korean party politics – particularly as an election approach, the will that Ahtisaari was calling for cannot exist.

Korea will be ready for peace only when the will to cooperate and enter into a genuine dialogue emerges – from the South as well as the North.